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AUTHOR Wishard, Armin
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ABSTRACT

Curricular innovations designed and implemented in the language department at Colorado College which are based on modular scheduling are discussed in this paper. Sequential courses of several varieties are discussed including: principal "full courses;" interdisciplinary courses; "half-courses;" and "adjunct courses." The courses are designed in flexible course modules labelled "blocks" and are offered in units of time ranging from three to 10 weeks' duration. The potential for individualizing instruction through such scheduling, for improving the instructional environment, and for increasing student and teacher contact is discussed. (RL)

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The Teaching of a Foreign Language in a Modular System of Instruction

In September of 1970, following extensive studies and research, The Colorado College[1] embarked on an ambitious and exciting new academic program. Under the Colorado College Plan (CCP), as it is called, the academic year has been divided into flexible course modules, labelled blocks. It now consists of units of three, three-and-one-half, seven, or ten-and-one-half weeks in length, with a total of thirty-three weeks or nine blocks per academic year. Within this format three different types of sequential courses are possible: first and most common are the principal "full courses" in which one professor works with a small group of students for one or two blocks on a stated subject; secondly, there are interdisciplinary courses involving more than one professor and a correspondingly larger group of students. Under this format, two or three faculty members from different departments teach a course within the available time framework of one or two blocks. For instance, a two-block course on Greek philosophy and literature is taught jointly by the departments of Philosophy and Classics. Finally, there are so-called "half courses" extending over ten-and-one-half weeks to accommodate subjects better taught over a longer period of time rather than very intensively. Under this last arrangement a student would take two "half courses" rather than one single course for a full load. This format, however, has all but disappeared in favor of the more popular "full courses".

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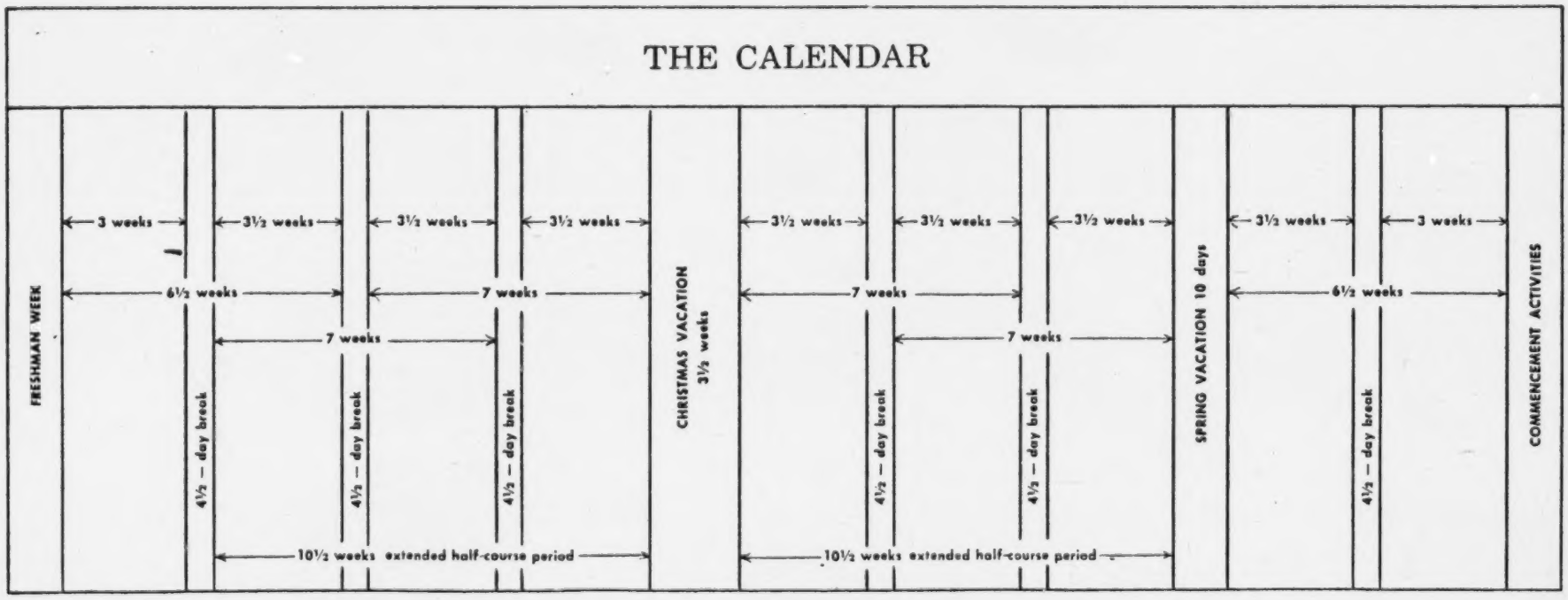
[1] A private, non-sectarian, coeducational college with an enrollment of 1700, located in Colorado Springs, Colorado.

In addition, special course sequences are possible should a course of study in a particular subject warrant such an arrangement. For instance, students are free to enroll in certain "adjunct courses" which are employed by the departments of Music, Dance and Foreign Languages to afford students an opportunity to maintain acquired skills and follow a variety of interests. A student may enroll in one of these for limited credit along with his principal course. Unlike "full" or "half courses" these "adjunct courses" typically extend over one whole semester but meet only a small number of hours so as not to interfere with the main subject. Furthermore, a student is free to enter such a course at most any time during the semester for maximum flexibility in the spirit of the Colorado College Plan.

Course credit is allowed on the following basis: one unit for a three or three-and-one-half week course; two units for a six-and-one-half or seven week course; one-and-one-half units for each extended "half course". "Adjunct courses" are granted one-quarter unit per semester. A total of thirty-four units of credit is required for graduation.

The plan of study just discussed thus appears as follows when viewed in a diagram:



Except for the opportunity to choose from the available "half courses", students are normally enrolled in only one "full course" at any one time, with the possible addition of up to two "adjunct courses" per year. Faculty members, too, concentrate on only one principal course in each block. As a result there is little or no fragmentation of effort. Students and teachers alike can avoid constant juggling of their time devoted to a number of courses and instead are able to focus their attention and concentration on one subject only. This obviously provides for increased opportunity to participate fully in the subject at hand.

Each course also offers its very own individual course room which frequently bears little resemblance to the traditional classroom. There is ample opportunity to arrange the physical environment to suit the subject. Scheduling, too, is very flexible. The professor and students are free to set daily and weekly schedules, made possible because there is neither conflict nor competition with other courses. Classes are not restricted by hourly bells and scrambles to get to other classes; instead, teachers, their students and the subject determine the time required.

Class instruction ends every day at 3 p.m. so as to allow students time for other activities, such as the important leisure-time program, lectures, sports, library research, writing and studies. The emphasis is placed on a balanced social and intellectual life in which the conflicting demands of simultaneous courses and the resultant frustrations have been eliminated.

The German department at the Colorado College, along with other foreign language departments, has found that the new plan lends itself particularly well to the teaching of languages and literature. In order to achieve maximum advantage a number of changes have been effected. Special course rooms have been prepared and outfitted with comfortable furniture, pictures, books, periodicals, audio-visual

equipment and material in an effort to enhance the atmosphere of learning and stimulate interest. Special guests are frequently invited to participate in the discussions and to meet with the students.

Following experimentation with three-block units elementary German courses will now be taught in two-block sequences of seven weeks in length, unlike other language departments which have decided to retain the longer format for the present. Typically, most of the basic material normally considered "first-year" German has been compressed roughly into two such modules. The same is true of "second-year" German.[2] It is expected that this shorter format will remain a successful part of the program.

Literature courses are, for the most part, taught in single block units, i.e. a freshman seminar on Hermann Hesse, German Poetry, or Romanticism. In contrast, the course "Age of Goethe" constitutes an exception and demonstrates the versatility of the plan. It extends over two blocks so as to allow for the volume of material.

Each professor adjusts meeting times to suit the needs of the class and the material to be discussed. A class might meet up to five times weekly, either once or twice daily for any number of hours. In elementary German courses meetings are generally scheduled for five days a week, for approximately three class hours daily. In addition, there is a scheduled laboratory time in which a teacher may or may not participate. Meeting times may be scheduled at any time during the day.

-The advantages of such flexibility and concentration are manifold. Students are enrolled in small classes with a favorable 14:1 student-teacher ratio; there is little or no absenteeism with class attendance at 90-100 per cent at all times. (This

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[2]It should be emphasized that such terms and artificial divisions are rather meaningless under such a system.

is, of course, a critical and annoying problem in most traditional systems with prevailing large classes and conflicting demands on the students' time.) Since cross-demands have been eliminated students also come to class well-prepared, which results in turn in livelier discussions and meetings. In case of lengthy and interesting discussions there is never the need to terminate because a bell is signaling another period; one can simply continue until the subject has been exhausted or one is satisfied that it has been satisfactorily treated.

Attempts are made to assure that the old curriculum is not simply poured into a new mold. The department utilizes a variety of techniques to teach and stimulate learning and interest. There are films, slide presentations, trips to German restaurants, the zoo or a retreat in the mountains, always with an emphasis on speaking and learning German. Last but not least there is also an active German House in which a native informant-director guides various activities for interested students, with full participation by the faculty.

One of the most successful experiments that this plan has permitted involves instruction of "Intermediate" German abroad. Under this plan a group of students and one professor are spending the last two blocks of the academic year in Germany, with most of the students remaining there independently for the summer as well. The basic curriculum of the course is taught on a regular daily basis at the home base in Munich. Students are also free to live with German families, meet other people and see the country. There is opportunity to travel individually or as a group on weekends. Under these circumstances students acquire a much greater knowledge and understanding of German life and letters than could otherwise be expected and may continue in advanced courses with better preparation upon their return to the campus. Once again, this program is made possible only because of a lack of interference from conflicting courses and the flexibility of the Colorado College Plan.

Since the College has only recently completed the first year of operation under the new plan there are invariably some open questions and problems. For instance, how well will the students retain the knowledge acquired under such intensive study? So far there is no reason to assume they will be at a disadvantage compared to a more traditional method of instruction or system. The department also offers "adjunct" or "skill maintenance" courses for the elementary and intermediate German levels. A student may enter such a course at any time during the semester for assistance in maintaining his level of competence in the language while studying other subjects. Unfortunately, these courses have not been entirely successful and experience has shown that they will require further modification with respect to format, content and scheduling in order to become more effective in the future.

Another concern is whether the increased time requirements will allow the faculty sufficient time for research and preparation of courses. The suggestion to provide one free block during the year will hopefully be realized for the whole faculty and thereby serve to compensate for the intensity of other modules.

There has also been criticism of the fact that faculty interaction on both a professional and informal level has decreased noticeably and that the four-and-one-half day break is not long enough to allow for both relaxation and preparation of the next course. Clearly this is an area requiring further thought. The suggestion has been made to lengthen the individual blocks to perhaps four or four-and-one-half weeks each and thereby reducing the total to seven or eight per year. It is thought that this may result in an improved climate of instruction, while leaving the basic idea of the plan unchanged.

While there are clearly some problems associated with the new plan the first year of operation has been remarkably successful. The advantages of modular scheduling are numerous and many benefits have been realized. Cross pressures have been eliminated; teachers and students alike demonstrate greater enthusiasm and invention in an improved

environment for teaching, learning and increased student-faculty contact. There is broad agreement that preparation and attendance have increased greatly, along with a seeming rise in student "academic and intellectual interest." The latest comprehensive survey shows that students and teachers have opted overwhelmingly in favor of the new system; 54 per cent of the students expressed a highly favorable reaction, 35 per cent a moderately favorable attitude toward the new plan. Seventy-one per cent of the faculty have responded in similarly favorable terms. These are only some of the indications which corroborate the success of the plan.

These responses indicate the measure of success during the first year under the modular system. Elimination of some existing problems and adjustments will ensure its continued effectiveness. In a time of critical examination of traditional methods of instruction the Colorado College Plan represents a vital step in curriculum development, teaching methods and excellence.

Armin Wishard
Assistant Professor of German
The Colorado College
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80903